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AUTHOR Cook, Mary Lou Wranesh
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ABSTRACT

Students in a senior level community health nursing course were required to complete an assignment and display their results in a poster session. The objective was to educate professional nurses to be prepared as presenters and viewers of poster sessions in order to publicize nursing activities. Using high risk groups in the community as the subject matter, students collected information to answer questions specific to each high risk group. General guidelines for displays were provided. The class members were also expected to be the audience for other members of their class to view, question, and comment. Pretest and posttest questionnaires were used to determine students' attitudes regarding preparation for the poster session, the importance of publicizing nursing activities, and the perceptions of this activity as a learning experience. Questionnaire results showed that students perceived themselves to be generally well prepared for the poster session and perceived importance in publicizing nursing activities. (SW)

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The Poster Session as a Student Reporting Technique

by
Mary Lou Wranesh Cook, M.S., R.N.
Assistant Professor
State University of New York
College of Technology
Utica, New York

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Introduction

The poster session is gaining visibility and acceptance as a method for reporting nursing activities and research results. Professionals in nursing, as in many other fields, need to be prepared to disseminate their knowledge and the advances in their practice. It is important that they share the information with colleagues and with health care consumers. The poster session encourages this.

This reporting technique is often used in conjunction with paper presentations in conference settings. The format allows for a number of presenters, from very few to several dozen, to display their projects and research in a limited time period. Participants can briefly review all projects and then conveniently concentrate on those of particular interest. It is essentially an information buffet.

Graduates of baccalaureate nursing programs are the professional nurses of today and tomorrow. They must be able to communicate effectively to enhance health care delivery. The ability to ask questions which stimulate thought and changes, in addition to effective verbal delivery, is a most desirable goal.

The poster session as an educational tool in the classroom has been used by Sweeney (1984) to familiarize students with use of graphic forms of communication, and Chute and Bank (1983) to provide alternatives to the formal oral presentation. Other literature offers descriptions and

advice for making posters and conducting poster sessions (Morra, 1984; Sexton, 1983).

The Project

The project described in this paper was designed as an opportunity for the students to be both presenters and consumers of the poster session. Senior level students in an upper division baccalaureate nursing program carried out this activity within the context of a community health nursing course. Within any educational setting, there are requirements for papers, and for individual and group oral presentations. The poster session provided an alternative to these common methods of presentation and also provided the students with experience in poster sessions. The assignment enhanced their abilities to devise and develop communication skills in a different context.

The class members were assigned to randomly selected groups of three persons to complete the assignment titled "High Risk Groups in the Community". The established criteria for the project included the identification of a high risk population group, analysis of needs of this population, and determination of the resources necessary to meet the needs. The student group was responsible for planning, organizing, and displaying the results in the poster session. The students were randomly assigned to the working groups to allow them to apply the principles of group process.

The students met throughout the semester to work on the group assignment. Information on the contents of posters and the physical set-up of the poster session were given to the students. The instructor, as facilitator of the project, was available for consultation throughout the planning period. As expected, during the early phases the major focus was the collection of information to answer the questions specific to each high risk group. The students gathered written references, spoke with agency personnel, and integrated their results.

As the designated time for the poster session approached the focus shifted to planning the posters. Much time and energy was spent on the actual poster. Because this was a different technique for all of those involved, many seemed to demonstrate enthusiasm for the change in routine. Others were reluctant and felt inhibited by the new medium. Students were given general guidelines for their displays and creativity was encouraged.

The site for the displays was chosen by the instructor early in the semester to allow for planning and physical availability. The actual poster session was held late in the semester to provide adequate time for completion of the project. Of the two separate classes involved in the project, one session was held in a lobby area outside the student dining facilities at the time of the evening meal. The other site chosen was a highly trafficked area in a main

classroom building at mid-day. One reason for choosing these locations was the access of students, faculty, and staff to stimulate discussion with the presenters. The class members were also expected to be the audience for other members of their class: to view, to question, to comment.

Results

Pretest and posttest questionnaires were used to determine the students' attitudes regarding preparation for the poster session, the importance of publicizing nursing activites, and the perceptions of this activity as a learning experience. A total of 39 students in two classes were asked to complete a brief five item questionnaire immediately prior to the poster sessions and at the completion of the sessions. Thirty-four completed pretest and 32 completed posttest questionnaires were returned. None of the students had prior experience with participating in poster sessions.

The students' perceptions of their preparation for the poster session as shown in Table 1 reveals 38% rated themselves as highly prepared prior to the display session. Posttest results demonstrated that 69% felt highly prepared at the completion of the session. This increase can be assumed to identify a change in the students'perceptions of levels of competency in conducting a project such as this.

Table 1

Students' Perceptions of Preparation for Poster Sessions

	Student Ratings				
	Low		Average		High
	1	2	3	4	5
Pretest	0%	0%	29%	32%	38%
Posttest	0%	1%	1%	28%	69%

The item which measured the perceptions of importance of publicizing nursing activities yielded similar results on the pretest and posttest (Table 2). A high rating was chosen by 53% of the respondents. The greatest change showed 9% rated this item as low on the pretest, 0% chose this rating on the posttest.

Table 2

Students' Perceptions of Importance of Publicizing Nursing Activities

	Student Ratings				
	Low		Average		High
	1	2	3	4	5
Pretest	9%	0%	15%	24%	53%
Posttest	0%	3%	13%	31%	53%

Expectations for personal benefit from participating in the poster sessions showed a shift to the high end of the scale from a mean of 3.3 on the pretest to a mean of 3.5 on the posttest (Table 3).

Table 3

Perceptions of Personal Benefit from Poster Assignment

	Student Ratings				
	Low		Average		High
	1	2	3	4	5
Pretest	12%	6%	38%	29%	15%
Posttest	9%	3%	31%	41%	16%

The specific physical locations provided a very disappointing public response. People quickly passed through the areas and engaged in only minimal conversation with students, despite the publicity of the event prior to its occurrence. The anticipated academic stimulation for students and viewers was minimal.

The students were their own best audiences. Because of their involvement with their projects, they were aware of the questions to ask each other to stimulate thought and discussion. Again unfortunately, they seemed much more eager to display this behavior when they believed they would be tested on the information offered by classmates.

Implications

The poster session can be an highly effective communication tool, but few people understand how to maximize its effect. A project such as this introduced the student to participation as one responsible for a poster display and also as a viewer. The students, as a group, gained positive attitudes about their abilities to conduct a project of this type.

Future research in this area might consider the most appropriate setting to encourage discussion among the students and viewers. The process of analytic thinking and the skill of thought provoking questionning can be much further developed. A follow-up of these students after one year and three years to determine their use of this experience would demonstrate some long term effect.

Summary

This paper described research and results of a project conducted in a senior level community health nursing course. The students were required to complete an assignment and display their results in a poster session. The anticipated outcome of this project was to educate professional nurses to be prepared as presenters and viewers of poster sessions. Completion of pretest and posttest questionnaires showed the students perceived themselves to be generally well prepared for the poster session and perceived importance in publicizing nursing activities.

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